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REPORT

British Film 2000–2010 : Crossing Borders, Transferring Cultures University of Mainz at Germersheim, 19–21 February 2010

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A host of British academics crossed the German border in February to gather in the small town of Germersheim (situated on the Rhine near the ancient city of Speyer and not far from Heidelberg) for what must have been the most high-profile conference on British film in Germany for a long time: the list of keynote speakers included Andrew Higson, John Hill, Sarah Street, James Chapman and Nick James, and was supplemented by more than a dozen established and young scholars mainly from England. The organiser Klaus Peter Müller must be congratulated on making this unlikely event possible with the help of the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft). The contemporary focus and concentrated format of the conference (with more than twenty papers in two and a half days) allowed for an intensive investigation of some of the key themes and problems of British film during the past decade. It was interesting to see several central issues recurring and approached from various perspectives, among them the current state of the British film industry (not much optimism here, unsurprisingly), the question of national identity, the impact of new media and technologies, or the evolution of various genres.

Regrettably, there was not much cultural transfer from the German side: several eminent experts on British film (Peter Drexler, Barbara Korte, Eckart Voigts-Virchow) were only acting as chairs rather than contributors, and two of the three German contributions, though interesting, were only marginally connected to the central themes of the conference (this does not include the one German-British *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 7.3 (2010): 486–491 DOI: 10.3366/E1743452110001779 © Edinburgh University Press www.eupjournals.com/jbctv 486

British Film 2000–10 'co-production' by Tobias Hochscherf and James Leggott, I hasten to add). This is despite the existence of a sophisticated discourse on British film in German academia, especially in English Departments, of which the above names (and several others, such as Jörg Helbig or Lucia Krämer) as well as the organisation of this conference are proof. Proceedings were started by Andrew Higson's insightful summary of major trends in British film-making during the preceding decade, which duly emphasised the role of the Film Council and generally the funding and production side, while also arguing for the increased importance of cultural factors (as witnessed

in the introduction of a 'cultural test' for Britishness by the Film Council in 2007) and the recent emergence of a 'culturally English' (rather than British) cinema, which would include films made outside England on essentially English themes. This argument was supported by various statistics showing both the relatively meagre market share of British-made films and the much larger impact of films based on English literary models or themes. The type and ideology of Englishness represented by each film is dependent on the funding and production background, according to Higson. Thus, big-budget transnational productions would mostly emphasise traditional, even stereotypical representations of England, while low-budget films are freer to investigate more local and perhaps more complex identities. In any case, culturally English film-making has become a well-developed niche practice within the global film business. Underlying this is an inherent ambiguity in the simultaneous emphasis on culturally distinctive British or English films on the one hand and on the transnational element and inward investment on the other. This contribution set the tone for two recurring themes of the conference: the more or less precarious situation of the British film industry and funding in the 2000s, and the complexities of representing (British) national identity in contemporary films. The first theme was taken up directly by Simon Rose who provocatively asked in his contribution 'Do the British hate British films?' It was difficult to take no as an answer to this question after his arguments from a film critic's and screenwriter's point of view on the lack of funding (e.g. for scriptwriting) and, frankly, of quality in British films of the last decade. He emphasised the systematic disadvantaging of the production-led British film industry vis-à-vis the distribution-led American system. The generally gloomy outlook of this paper was partly mirrored in other presentations, such as Nick James's keynote on 'Aesthetic reticence in 21st-century British cinema', in which he diagnosed a distinct lack of stylistic innovation⁴⁸⁷

Dietmar Böhne à la Powell/Pressburger, Roeg or Jarman, even in critically successful film-makers such as Lynne Ramsay, Andrea Arnold or Shane Meadows. Even though James did point out some exceptions to the rule, such as Michael Winterbottom's *Cock and Bull Story* (2005) or perhaps even Guy Ritchie's recent *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), the overall impression remained pessimistic. From a genre point of view, this darkening mood was evidenced in Robert Murphy's presentation on crime and horror films as well as Phillip Bergson's contribution on comedy and satire, both of which testified to a 'dark shadow' hanging over recent examples of these genres, illustrated by reference to films like *Eden Lake* (2008), *The Children* (2008) and the Channel 4 adaptation of David Peace's *Red Riding* novels (2009) in the first case and *Death at a Funeral* (2007), among others, in the second. While Murphy argued that most of these recent films were in fact of high quality, Bergson looked in vain for the 'typically English' type of humour so favoured by cinema-goers in the past – it has to be added that not everyone in the audience agreed with this argument. It highlights, however, another of the recurring themes of the conference, that of Englishness/Britishness and national/regional identity in general, to which I will turn next. Before that, allow me to add a personal comment: from a German perspective, this almost obligatory pessimistic streak in British film criticism always seems rather surprising, since British film does comparatively well in a European context, and the many interesting and complex sample films discussed at this and other conferences seem to undermine this argument to some

extent. Looking at the titles of the contributions to this conference, it is difficult to miss the emphasis on Britishness and also, interestingly, on Englishness in many of the papers. One reason for this might have been the German venue for the event, but this question of national identity in British film has been quite central to academic discussions for some time, often in connection with a perceived 'crisis of Britishness' due to supranational (globalisation, immigration) and subnational (devolution, 'regional' nationalism) developments. Following Higson's presentation, the characteristic gesture in discussions of this issue was one of complexity and ambivalence, highlighting both the continued relevance of Britishness and the increasing problematisation and fragmentation of the concept through various other identities and discourses. Brian Baker looked at the 'Post-British science fiction film' with reference to *Code 46* (2003), *Children of Men* (2006) and *28 Days Later* (2002), diagnosing both a 'post-national' quality in terms of setting and use of space as well as a traditional British element of 'cosy catastrophe' narratives, which he historicised by looking at the science fiction tradition of the 1950s–70s. Julia Hallam followed up her earlier work on regional elements in British films with an analysis of the role of landscape in recent low-budget films like *Morvern Callar* (2002), *Better Things* (2008) or *Fish Tank* (2009). Rather than being symbolic of any regional or national identity (as consumable tourist attractions, for example), landscapes in these films are read as psychologically relevant for the characters (e.g. as signs of entrapment or threat, perhaps also hope); sense of self rather than sense of place is what matters. In their deliberately non-commercial style, these films can be seen in a tradition reaching back to Powell and Pressburger through Terence Davies and Bill Douglas. From another perspective, such often unremarkable settings and everyday details can be interpreted as being nevertheless representative for English/Britishness, if we follow theories of 'banal nationalism' rather than the more elitist and widespread concepts of Gellner, Anderson et al. This was the line of argument pursued by Tim Edensor in his paper with reference to films such as *This Is England* (2006) and again *Fish Tank*. In this richly theorised and contextualised contribution, a convincing case was made for a construction of Britishness through precisely those everyday mundane settings, which allow the audience to access certain unique 'structures of feeling' (Raymond Williams). Within this frame of reference, the concept of 'interspatiality' was stressed by Edensor, providing a link both to Higson's initial argument and several other papers highlighting interrelations and transfers between various British cultures. Among these, John Hill's keynote on the negotiation of English, Irish and Scottish identities in Ken Loach's films stood out both for highlighting Loach's European connections (a theme distinctly underexplored at the conference in my view) and for pointing to the ultimate incommensurability of the move towards Scottishness/Irishness in films like *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), *Ae Fond Kiss* (2004), *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006) or Loach's contribution to *Tickets* (2005), on the one hand, and his internationalist class politics on the other (even though they might at first sight seem compatible). Such a complex argumentation does not shirk the real problems and fault lines opened up by contemporary multicultural Britishness and its cinematic representations, unlike some discussions of 'ethnic' films that frequently settle for a seemingly unproblematic hybridity in which characters and representations can be both authentically Asian (for example) and fully British. Most papers on this topic here circumvented such

simplicity, even though Yasmin Hussain's presentation on Gurinder Chadha's work partly suffered from this attitude. In contrast, both Matthias Bauer's discussion of Sally489

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British Film 2000–10 the past decade in the presentations on science fiction, horror and comedy already mentioned, as well as a thrilling keynote on recent 'high-concept' television drama by James Chapman, using the BBC series *Spooks* (2002–) as the central example. Overall, this conference can be judged a success, even though the cultural transfer remained slightly one-sided and there was no involvement of the wider academic community or even the general public in this event (strangely, given the intense interest in British film in this country).